

Noxious Weed Identification

Agriculture and Natural Resources Fact Sheet #535



Proper identification is critical for managing and controlling noxious weeds. Here are brief descriptions for 12 noxious weeds common to King County. For photographs and more detailed descriptions see *Weeds of the West* by Whitson et al. and for information on controlling weeds see Fact Sheet # 534 *Controlling Noxious Weeds on the Farm*.

Annual – completes its life cycle in one year, i.e. germinates from seed, produces seed, and dies in the same season.



Perennial – continues to live from year to year. In many cases, in cold climates the tops die down but the roots and rhizomes persist.

Biennial – completes its life cycle in two years. The first year it produces leaves and stores food. The second year it blossoms and produces seed.

Weed Name	Description	Can Be Confused With	
Bull thistle (<i>Cirsium vulgare</i>)	Biennial Grows upright 2-5 feet with slightly spreading branches. Foliage is hairy with prominent spines on deeply lobed leaf margins. Leaves of mature plants are alternate. Has a taproot with a secondary fibrous root system. Flowers are purple and measure about 2 inches in diameter and are found in clusters at the ends of branches. A circle of bracts under the flower is tapered and has spines. Seeds have a circle of plume-like white hairs. Juvenile plant leaves form a rosette with spines on the surface and edges of the deeply lobed leaves.	Differs from Canada thistle in that bull thistle leaves are hairy on both top and undersides while Canada thistle are not hairy at all on top and may or may not be on the underside. Also, bull thistle flowers have spines whereas Canada thistle flowers do not.	
Canada thistle (<i>Cirsium arvense</i>)	Perennial Canada thistle is an aggressive, erect plant that forms dense patches. The leaves are lobed with spiny edges; the stems are hollow. The flowers are usually shades of purple, but can also be pink or white, and are surrounded by spineless or weakly-spined, scale-like leaves called <i>bracts</i> . Male and female flowers are produced on separate plants. Female flowers are larger and produce seeds with feathery attachments called <i>pappus</i> , which readily breaks away from the seed. Male plants produce smaller flowers and pappus, and no seed. Canada Thistle generally flowers from mid-June into September.	Seedlings of Canada thistle are similar to Perennial Sowthistle, but the first true leaves of Canada Thistle are hairy and the later leaves are narrower, darker green, and with coarser spines.	

Weed Name	Description	Can Be Confused With	Illust
Creeping Buttercup (<i>Ranunculus repens</i> L.)	Perennial Flowers are mostly yellow, regular, and showy, commonly with 5 petals but occasionally with up to 10. Leaves are commonly 3- and 5-parted or deeply cut into long, narrow divisions. Individual fruits are small, usually horned, hooked, or beaked, and arranged in a head. Creeping buttercup is a perennial that spreads by seeds and by stems that root at lower nodes. Leaf blades are divided into 3 toothed lobes attached to long stalks, and they are hairy.	There are many native species of buttercup in the Pacific Northwest. The weedy species are of European origin. Some plants in the rose family can be confused with buttercups.	
Orange Hawkweed (<i>Hieracium aurantiacum</i>)	Perennial Also known as devil's paintbrush, Orange Hawkweed is easily recognized by its showy red-orange flowers. It is a perennial with lance-shaped, hairy leaves that form a basal rosette. The erect, bristly stem grows up to twelve inches tall, producing 5 to 30 flowers at the tip. Occasionally there are one or two small leaves on the stem. The entire plant contains a milky juice. The root system is fibrous. It thrives in disturbed areas such as roadsides, gravel pits and pastures. It can also invade forested areas and is somewhat shade tolerant. It outcompetes many native species by forming dense, monotypic stands, or competes with forest understory plants. It spreads by seeds, stolons or rhizomes.	Hawkweeds are notorious for their complex and confusing classification. Species are difficult to distinguish because they interbreed freely, and many look like hybrids.	
Yellow Hawkweeds (<i>H. atratum</i> , <i>H. caespitosum</i> , <i>H. floibundum</i> , <i>H. laevugatum</i> , <i>H. pilosella</i> , <i>H. piloselloides</i> , <i>H. pratense</i>)	Perennial Similar to Orange Hawkweed except flowers are yellow. Yellow Hawkweeds are difficult to distinguish from one another.	Yellow flowered hawkweeds are often collectively called meadow hawkweeds.	

Weed Name	Description	Can Be Confused With
Japanese Knotweed (<i>Polygonum cuspidatum</i>) and Giant Knotweed (<i>Polygonum sachalinense</i>)	Perennial Japanese knotweed is a large, robust perennial that spreads by long creeping rhizomes to form dense thickets. The stems are stout, cane-like, reddish-brown, 4 to 9 feet tall. The plants die back at the end of the growing season. The stem nodes are swollen and surrounded by thin papery sheaths. The leaves are short-petioled, 2 to 6 inches long and about two-thirds as wide, egg-shaped and narrowed to a point at the tip. The flowers are small, creamy white to greenish white, and grow in showy plume-like, branched clusters from leaf axils near the ends of the stems. The fruit is 3-sided, black and shiny.	Giant knotweed (<i>Polygonum sachalinense</i>) is closely related and similar looking. Giant knotweed is larger, reaching 12 ft. tall and the leaves are up to 12 in. across. The two species can hybridize.
Diffuse Knapweed (<i>Centaurea diffusa</i>)	Annual or short-lived perennial Diffuse knapweed is a biennial or weak perennial that is shorter than spotted knapweed. Growing from a deep taproot, its upright stems have numerous spreading branches giving the plant a ball shape. Heads of white (sometimes pink to purple) flowers are solitary or in clusters of two or three at the ends of the branches. Excluding flowers and spines, heads are about 3/16" in diameter and 5/16" tall. Bracts around the flower heads are yellowish green with a light brown margin, fringed in spines ending with a longer spine at the tip.	Resembles spotted knapweed but is shorter and flowers tend to be white.

Weed Name	Description	Can Be Confused With	Illust
Meadow Knapweed (<i>Centaurea jacea</i> x <i>nigra</i>)	Perennial It is a perennial of the sun-flower family (Asteraceae) and grows from a woody crown. Upright stems branch near the middle. Its leaves are up to 6 inches long by more than an inch wide. The lower leaves are lobed or toothed; middle and upper leaves are linear. In King County it flowers from May to August, later if it is mowed. Its flower heads are solitary at tips of the branches. Each is about the size of a nickel, pink to purple, and much rounder than spotted knapweed heads. Bracts around the flower head are light to dark brown, with paper-fringed margin. Seeds are about 1/8 inch long, ivory to light brown. A short row of hairs may be present on one end.	Flowers pink to purple but are much rounder than spotted knapweed heads.	
Spotted Knapweed (<i>Centaurea biebersteinii</i>)	Biennial or short-lived perennial Spotted knapweed is a perennial with several branched upright stems growing from a stout taproot; usually to 5 feet tall. Leaves become smaller as they advance up the stem; heads of pink to purple (sometimes white) flowers grow at the ends of the branches; excluding flowers, the heads are about 1/4" in diameter by 1/2" tall. Bracts around the flower heads have obvious vertical veins below the black triangular spot on the bract tip. It flowers continuously from early summer into the fall, as long as moisture and temperatures permit.	Resembles diffuse knapweed but is taller and flowers tend to be pink to purple.	

Weed Name	Description	Can Be Confused With	Illust
Scotch Broom or Scot's Broom (<i>Cytisus scoparius</i> L. Link.)	Perennial shrub It is loosely branched with slender, green ribbed branches and small, simple leaves up to half an inch long. It grows from 3 to 10 feet in height. The bright yellow flowers are pea-like, about three-quarters of an inch long. Its seed is borne in dark brown to black hairy, flattened pea-like pods, which when ripe, burst and scatter seeds for yards. Scot's broom grows primarily in open, dry meadows and along roadsides.		
Tansy Ragwort (<i>Senecio jacobaea</i> L.)	Biennial or short-lived perennial The plant's stem is stout, erect or slightly spreading, and may be branched; often groups of stems arise from the plant crown. Tansy ragwort, a biennial plant, usually germinates in fall or early winter, lives through the next year as a rosette, then dies the next year after producing flowers and seeds. Its leaves are dark green on top, whitish-green underneath, and have deeply cut, blunt-toothed lobes with a ragged/ruffled appearance. Flower clusters develop on stout, leafy elongated stems that grow up to 6 feet tall; each flower cluster is composed of many bright-yellow flowers with (usually) 13 petals. Its seeds have a white pappus and are wind-carried, resulting in rapid spread of tansy ragwort infestations. A single large plant may produce 150,000 seeds, which may lie dormant in the soil for as long as 15 years. The plant's fibrous system of coarse, light colored roots spreading from the crown can produce small adventitious shoots when stimulated by mechanical destruction or pulling.	Common tansy (<i>Tanacetum vulgare</i>), Common groundsel (<i>Senecio vulgaris</i>), and Woodland groundsel (<i>Senecio sylvaticus</i>) are often confused with Tansy ragwort. All such closely related species, as well as other yellow-flowered plants that at first resemble tansy ragwort from a distance, are easily distinguished by comparing their leaves or flower heads with those of tansy ragwort.	

Weed Name	Description	Can Be Confused With	Illust
Yellow Nutsedge (<i>Cyperus esculentus</i> L.)	Yellow nutsedge is a perennial sedge with glossy, triangular stems that grow from 6 to 30 inches tall. Most of the leaves grow from the base and are as long as, or longer than, the stem. Straw-colored to golden brown seed heads are surrounded by a whorl of leaf-like bracts.	Resembles grass but is distinguished by its triangular stems and three-ranked (groups of three) glossy leaves.	

**Alternate formats available upon request.
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